

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## ***Joyful Strains: Making Australia Home* edited by Kent MacCarter and Ali Lemer (Affirm Press, 2013)**

It is widely acknowledged that the processes of migration and integration involve self-reinvention and transformation. Many of the 27 autobiographical stories comprising *Joyful Strains* focus on this aspect: as Irish migrant Chris Flynn observes in his reflection 'Gun for Hire', 'Here, it doesn't matter who you used to be' (133).

While this may be true, the process of re-invention necessarily involves a dislocation, both geographical and emotional. For those who arrived without the benefit of English and those from culturally diverse countries the sense of dislocation, of a divided self is especially acute. In 'Night of the Living Wog', Dmetri Kakmi, who migrated with his parents from a Turkish village via Athens to settle in suburban north Melbourne in 1971 at age 10, vividly portrays his sense of bewilderment: 'The dilemma was that the rules were different in this country and I did not know how to interpret them' (27). Forced by his headmaster to assume the name 'Jim', because 'In Australia we can't pronounce your name' (27), Kakmi recalls, 'From then on, not only did I not know where I was but I was no longer who I had been ... the peasant boy was stripped of place and identity ... Dmetri was familiar to me ... Who was Jim?' (27-28).

Similar cruel and insensitive treatment by adults in authority is reported by other contributors who migrated as children. The deliberate mispronunciation of Paola Totaro's name as 'Potato Tomato' by her class teacher at an upmarket Sydney school in the 1970s directly contributed to her sense of alienation from her classmates ('Pointing North'). In an effort 'to melt in; ... to feel ... less obvious' (72) during her teenage years Paola Anglicised her given name to Paula, but recalls her joy at reclaiming the name Paola when she commenced work.

Before the easy access to electronic media and communication, for many adult migrants, especially those bringing children, there was an added temporal dimension to the sense of dislocation from the country where their own identity was formed. That is, they are too far removed to see the changes happening in the society they have left and, as a consequence, the mores of their home country become frozen in time on the day of their departure. Several of those who arrived in Australia as child migrants report that they invariably found themselves mediating conflicts between a need to establish their place within the dominant power group of the classroom and the strictures of parental demands based on their own, often outmoded, experiences. For some, such as Diane Armstrong who with her Jewish family fled war-torn Poland, this was based on 'relentless tension, anxiety and fear' (134), and the necessity that to survive she must 'be wary, and to keep my thoughts and feelings to myself' (135). Like many, Diane had to transform herself 'from a withdrawn Polish child to a confident fun-loving Australian girl' (136).

Several of the contributors to this anthology share a sense of frustration and anger with the current political demonisation of asylum seekers and are heavily involved in supporting other refugees, including those held in detention centres. In 'The Crappiest Refugee' (162), Canadian Danny Katz brilliantly satirises the shameful political posturing that makes a mockery of the sentiments embraced in our national anthem, *Advance Australia Fair*:

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For those who've come across the seas  
We've boundless plains to share.

Parodying Canadian migrants to Australia as people who 'insist on keeping their ethnic culture, language and religion' (163) and persist in 'walking our city streets in small intimidating caribou packs, offending everyone with their culturally insensitive Roots brand Beaver Canoe sweatshirts' (162-3), Katz humorously up-ends the oft-repeated complaints about migrants' reluctance to become 'Australian'. Similarly, in 'Confessions of a Ditch-Jumper' (56), fellow ex-Commonwealth migrant from New Zealand, Meg Mundell, also reminds us of the preferential treatment accorded those from other Commonwealth member-countries: 'No-one's ever accused me of stealing their job, jumping a queue' (58). And how, despite the fact that 'roughly 30,000 Kiwis hop the Ditch annually, and half a million New Zealand citizens currently live here ... the tabloids and shock jocks don't describe us as a "flood". And unlike African, Arabic or Asian immigrants, no one tells me to "integrate"' (58).

Some of the true gems in this collection are those that illuminate aspects of Australian life and culture either at odds with, or surprisingly attuned to, the author's place of birth. For example, perhaps there is no greater evidence of real integration than those who have forged close connections with Indigenous communities, drawing on their shared struggle for justice and freedom in their native lands. In the words of former Chilean political prisoner Juan Garrido-Salgado, 'Connecting with Indigenous Australians was as if another voice from both far or near took our hands and moved us, making us open our eyes, making us laugh and become able to talk about anything' (223).

While, without exception, the authors of these memoirs express gratitude for the haven provided by Australia, they also serve as a reminder that for migrants there are no all-embracing happy endings: 'Joyful strains' are invariably coloured by the innate consciousness that, as Ouyang Yu describes, he or she is 'living in two places simultaneously, one physical and the other metaphysical, an expatriate existence that merges the real with the sub-real and the surreal' (158).

Some of the memoirs contained in this collection are written with humour, some are social commentary, some confronting. All display exceptional thoughtfulness and self-awareness. *Joyful Strains* provides 27 wide-ranging snapshots of what it means to make Australia home.

**Lesley Wyndram**